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ABSTRACT

The vocational and educational goals of 418 psychology majors and 1134 non-majors in undergraduate psychology classes at the University of Houston were investigated. Results indicate important discrepancies between majors and non-majors on vocational and educational goals, as well as discrepancies between goals of psychology majors and those of the standard undergraduate psychology curriculum. Psychology majors are strongly interested in becoming mental health practitioners and obtaining advanced degrees for that purpose, whereas non-majors view psychology courses as contributing toward meeting their need for general education. (Author)

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Goals of Psychology Undergraduates: Majors and Non-Majors

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Abstract

Results of a survey of 418 psychology majors and 1134 non-majors in undergraduate psychology classes at the University of Houston indicate important discrepancies between majors and non-majors on vocational and educational goals. Discrepancies between goals of psychology majors and those of the standard undergraduate psychology curriculum were also found. Proposals concerning curriculum change are made, with the goal of solving the problems resulting from these discrepancies.

Goals of Psychology Undergraduates: Majors and Non-Majors

Undergraduates taking psychology courses have diverse and changing goals. For this reason it is worthwhile for psychology departments to periodically survey their students. Despite bleak prospects for both jobs and graduate school admissions, psychology majors keep coming, for reasons that we do not fully understand. Previous surveys have investigated the goals and job and educational status of psychology graduates (Cates, 1977; Lunneborg, 1974), but little illuminating data is available on psychology undergraduates prior to graduation. The opinions and goals of non-majors who flock to our courses have also been neglected. They presumably have expectations that differ from those of the psychology majors. For these reasons, in the Spring of 1977, we undertook a survey of majors and non-majors in psychology courses at the University of Houston. This University is large, urban, public, and is primarily non-residential. It typifies recent trends in American higher education.

The survey asked students what they expected from college, how well their expectations were being met, and what their education and career goals were. Psychology majors were also asked about their reasons for majoring. All items were closed-ended, and came from multiple sources. The questionnaire was completed by 418 undergraduate psychology majors (82% of the population) and 1134 undergraduate non-psychology majors (40% of the population). The results of the survey provide a basis for some proposals concerning the undergraduate curriculum in psychology.

Results

The Survey Sample

Psychology majors. Our undergraduate psychology majors are predominantly older (44% over 24) female (68%) working (66%) students who have transferred (62%) from other schools. About 3/4 of them were juniors and seniors, and this reflected actual

enrollments well. Most (54%) had changed from some other major to psychology. About 17% reported grade averages of A or A-, 35% B+ or B, and 48% B- or below. The best students (the top 17%) were predominantly older females.

Non-majors. Our non-majors were from diverse areas: 22% from natural sciences or mathematics, 17% from business, 16% from humanities or fine arts, 15% from education, 12% from social sciences, and 18% from other areas. They were about evenly divided among class levels: approximately equal numbers of freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors.

Reasons for majoring. Two items in the survey asked psychology majors to rate the importance of various possible reasons for majoring in psychology, and to indicate the most important reason. Responses on these items are shown in Table 1. Desire for a career in psychology or a closely related field was the most important reason for most majors. Enjoyment of psychology courses and understanding self and others followed as poor second and third. Helping people was surprisingly low. Nevertheless, all these reasons were also rated as very important by most majors.

Degree goals

Both majors and non-majors were asked to indicate the highest academic degree they intended to obtain. Responses are shown in Table 2. Majors and non-majors contrasted sharply. While 35% of non-majors intended to obtain just a Bachelors degree, only 18% of psychology majors did. The small percentage of psychology majors intending to stop at the Bachelors is smaller than that found in previous surveys, and also indicates that many majors have unreasonably high aspirations. While 72% of the majors intended to obtain graduate degrees, only 52% reported GPAs of 3.00 or greater.

Similar proportions of both groups were planning on Masters degrees, but non-majors planned more professional degrees and much less doctoral-level training.

Of the majors planning post-baccalaureate training, nearly two-thirds planned it in psychology. This interest in psychology graduate work was overwhelmingly in

areas preparing the student for careers in mental health care and in other applied psychology professions.

Career goals

To survey the career goals of the majors and non-majors, we asked them to indicate their first choice from a ten-item list of career areas. Their choices are shown in Table 3. Majors were most interested in clinical psychology or counseling, and next most interested in business and social services. There was little interest in teaching, either in college or at primary or secondary levels. Non-majors were most interested in business, health, and primary or secondary teaching. Few non-majors were interested in careers in clinical or counseling psychology or in social services.

Needs in college

We asked students to rate the importance of various college-related needs, to pick the most important need, and indicate how much each need had been met in college. These data are summarized in Table 4. The responses indicate the strong career concerns of both majors and non-majors. Career preparation was chosen as the most important need by both groups. But, grasp of the major field was rated just as essential as career preparation, and general education was also rated as essential by most students. Although both groups of students are career oriented, they also strongly endorsed more traditional educational goals. When asked to rate their overall satisfaction, about 4/5 were satisfied or very satisfied that the university was meeting their needs. However, fewer majors than non-majors were satisfied with the contribution of the psychology department toward meeting their needs (77% vs 88%). Among majors, the area of most discrepancy between goals and meeting of needs was that of career preparation.

Subgroups of majors

To get an idea of the generalizability of these findings to other types of

institutions, two subgroups of psychology majors were also examined. One was the subgroup of 145 "typical" young full-time students. The other was the subgroup of 64 superior students (those who reported an A or A- average). Both subgroups were even more career oriented and more oriented toward graduate training in mental health care professions than the group of all majors as a whole.

Discussion

Overall, the most striking findings are the strong career motivations of all students, and the strong interest in graduate training in applied psychology among psychology majors. Although both majors and non-majors were strongly career oriented, their specific career interests and corresponding academic goals were very different.

Career orientation

We will first discuss problems brought about by the differing interests of majors and non-majors. Majors were strongly interested in becoming mental health practitioners and in obtaining advanced degrees for that purpose. For majors, interest in teaching, reported in an earlier survey (Cates, 1973) was not strong in this survey, and may reflect the increasingly tight job market in this area. The largest groups of non-majors were oriented toward careers in business, health, and primary or secondary teaching.

Different goals of majors and non-majors

Non-majors apparently view psychology courses as contributing toward meeting their need for general education, and look primarily to their own major departments for career preparation. On the other hand, most majors look to psychology for preparation for graduate training in applied psychology or psychology-related careers. Yet, most psychology majors were once non-majors. Since students perceive many careers in education and health as psychology-related (Lunneborg, 1974), it is not surprising that some non-majors with these interests change to psychology. The

predominant career interest of non-majors, business, is also shared by a substantial proportion of majors. How can the differing but sometimes blending goals of these groups be accommodated?

This problem is not restricted just to courses in introductory psychology. Non-majors are often in the majority in three other types of psychology courses: ones which cover the applications of psychology in their domains of interest (e.g., Industrial or Educational psychology), ones in which the student is partly a client (e.g., Adjustment), and even in courses which faculty usually consider to be basic courses for majors (e.g., Tests and measurement). Non-majors enroll in these courses to meet specific requirements of other departments; others are elective choices. In courses in which non-majors are in the majority, there is a danger that the interests of the non-majors and of the professor will predominate. The interests of most psychology majors may be lost in the shuffle.

How can this dilemma of differing goals and interests be solved? Some departments create two tracks: separate courses for majors and for non-majors. But, this adversely affects the large numbers of non-majors who change to majoring in psychology. Another solution, which we prefer, takes account of the large set potential psychology majors among non-majors. We propose that for basic courses that are of central importance to psychology majors, small "honors" sections with a special orientation toward majors be created whenever possible. Non-majors need not be excluded, but it would be understood that most would take the regular sections. The regular sections would normally be more oriented toward non-majors' interests. In courses in which the student is a "client", or in ones which explicitly treat domains of application of psychology (e.g., Educational psychology), the interests of majors and non-majors should not conflict, and special sections would probably not

be needed.

Applied psychology interests of majors

The other striking finding from the survey is the strong interest of psychology majors in graduate training in applied psychology. Psychology majors, especially the best students, have goals which are importantly discrepant from what most faculty expect. Many also have goals that are unrealistic, given the realities of graduate admissions and the job market. Each of these two major problems requires a major effort to find solutions.

To solve the problem of unrealistic goals, counseling and advisement will probably not be sufficient. We propose that many opportunities for field experience be provided. These will help in several ways: some students will find that their planned career is not what they expected, and will change goals; others will gain increased motivation to proceed; others will gain work experience that will make them more employable at the Bachelors level. Opportunities for early field experience can be provided in the context of the introductory course or in applied courses such as Industrial psychology. Several types of field experience are discussed by Kulik et al.(1973).

We also propose that the validity of psychology as a liberal arts should be re-emphasized. Careers in health, education, business, and law are within reach if supplementary courses are taken to prepare for these areas, as pointed out by Pinkus and Korn (1973). The understanding of human nature provided by psychology is certainly compatible with these career areas.

To help solve the problem of conflict between applied students and the basic curriculum, we offer two proposals. One is to reconceptualize the curriculum so that basic psychology can be seen in its relation to applied problems. The essential contributions of psychology can be thought of as a set of paradigms (that is,

alternative points of view and approaches as described by Kuhn (1964)). One or more of these paradigms is usually implicit in various human services strategies. By understanding several paradigms (e.g., behaviorist analysis, biological-physiological analysis, and social-cultural analysis), the student can better understand a range of points of view and intervention strategies when faced with a human services problem. We have described this curriculum in more detail in Malin and Timmreck (1978). Second, applied research opportunities can and should be increased. Field experience should be integrated with both skills-training and research so that our preprofessional students can be sophisticated and motivated researchers. This could be accomplished, for example, in three course sequences: first a classroom course in concepts and skills in an applied area such as behavior modification, followed by a field-experience course in that area, and then followed by individual research with the professor in this area.

In summary, several findings imply a need for changes in the psychology curriculum to coordinate the needs of non-majors and majors and to respond to the applied interests of majors. It is hoped that the proposals provided here will prove useful to psychology departments as they confront these dilemmas on their own ground.

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Table 1

Percentages of Psychology Majors Rating
Reasons for Majoring in Psychology

Reason	Most Important	Rating		
		Very Important	Fairly Important	Not Important
Career in psychology or closely related field	52	75	14	10
Enjoy psychology courses	17	72	23	4
Understanding self and others	14	59	32	8
Success in life	6	46	46	8
Helping people	5	53	37	10
Flexible major requirements	4	10	22	66
Easy courses	1	15	36	48

Table 2

Percentages of Majors and Non-Majors
Planning on Various Degrees

Degrees	Majors	Non-Majors
Bachelors	18	35
Masters in Psychology	19	2
Masters in social work or education	8	10
Other Masters	12	24
Doctorate in basic psychology[a]	4	0
Doctorate in applied psychology[b]	26	2
Doctorate in Education	0	2
Professional degree in health (medicine, optometry, dentistry, pharmacy, etc.)	5	14
Professional degree in law	4	5
Other Doctorate	2	5

Note - the query was "What is the highest academic degree you intend to obtain?"
[a]The alternative was "Doctorate in social, developmental, cognitive, learning, personality or biological psychology or other "basic" psychology.
[b]The alternative was "Doctorate in clinical, counseling, industrial/organizational, environmental, community or educational or other "applied" psychology.

Table 3

Percentages of Majors and Non-Majors
Hoping to Enter Various Careers

Careers	Majors	Non-Majors
Clinical psychology or counseling	42	5
College teaching and/or research	7	6
Teaching, primary or secondary	3	15
Social services: social work, case work, etc.	12	5
Health: nursing, medicine, pharmacy, optometry, dentistry, etc.	10	23
Law, politics, law enforcement, criminology, etc.	6	6
Business: personnel, management, sales, accounting, etc.	17	30
Urban planning, architecture, engineering, etc.	2	8
Clergy	2	0
Clerical, secretarial	0	1

Note - The query was "We would like to know what type of career you hope to enter. Which one of the following areas would be your first choice?"

Table 4

Percentages of Students Rating
Needs to be Met in College

	Most Important		Essential		Much in College	
	Majors	Non-Majors	Majors	Non-Majors	Majors	Non-Majors
Career preparation	55	49	76	82	28	35
Citizenship	2	2	27	32	13	12
Social Competence	5	6	39	44	15	13
General Education	22	21	61	55	30	19
Major Field	7	11	78	81	46	41
Enjoy and Care	9	11	48	43	24	18

Note - The queries were: "How important is it to you to get each of the following at college?" "Which one of these things is most important and essential to you?" "Indicate how much each of these needs has been met here at college." The alternatives were:

1. Preparation for a career, occupation, or profession
2. Preparation to be a good citizen: knowledgeable about community and world affairs
3. Preparation to get along competently in society today
4. Increased understanding of myself and the world and increased ability to make good judgments
5. Grasp of the subject matter, ideas, and methods in my major field
6. Increased ability to enjoy and care about myself and others